

The ultimacy of essence

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Research Article

Keywords: essence, necessity, modality, intrinsicality, ultimacy

Posted Date: September 4th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10795363/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at Global Philosophy on October 17th, 2026.
See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10516-026-09817-1>.

The ultimacy of essence

Abstract: A common feature of recent metaphysical discussion are explanations stating that an object x is F by virtue of its essence or nature. These explanations are ultimate in the sense that there is no further explanation as to why they hold. Given that x is F by virtue of its nature, there is no further essentialist fact that explains this fact. I critically survey three recent accounts of the ultimacy of essence and argue that they fail to be ultimate in the intended sense. In light of this discussion, I suggest that a modal account of intrinsicity may present a viable alternative to essentialist explanations.

Keywords: essence; necessity; modality; intrinsicity; ultimacy

In recent metaphysical discussion, essence plays a particular kind of explanatory role. An object's essence states what that object is. Take an essentialist explanation of the form: x is F by virtue of the nature or essence of x .¹ There is no point in further asking why x is F : x *just is* F by virtue of its nature. This reflects the fact that essentialist explanations have an ultimate character, which, by extension, reflects the *ultimacy* of the essence as explanans.²

This notion of ultimacy is problematic because it may be taken to curtail the possibility of further inquiry, rather than bringing it to a satisfying close. I distinguish two aspects of the ultimacy of essence. On the one hand, its *finality* indicates that there are no further substantial insights to be made into why x is F . We cannot know, any more ultimately or exactly, why it is that x is F than by being told that this is so in virtue of x 's nature. For example, suppose that it is essential to the singleton set $\{\text{Socrates}\}$ to contain Socrates as the sole member. This essential fact holds by virtue of the nature of the singleton set. And it seems that there is no further use in asking in virtue of what this essential fact holds, i.e., why it is essential to $\{S\}$ to contain S . This just is what the essence of a singleton set is. Here, we have reached "the end of the

¹ Let me shortly comment on the form of the essentialist locution above. There are different ways to formulate essentialist statements in the literature. In Fine's version, predicates are associated with an essential operator $\Box_F$, such that the statement $\Box_F A$ has the intended meaning "A is true in virtue of the nature of the objects which F." (Fine 1995a, 241f.). Next to this sentential operator, one can find expressions of essence using the relational predicate 'true in virtue of the nature of' (Correia 2012). Nothing about my proposal hinges in particular on these differences, so I merely note them here. Further, the terms "nature" and "essence" are used interchangeably throughout, though cf. Cowling (2013) for an argument to the effect that they should not be equated. I also note that I will be mainly concerned with the essence of objects. Recently, there has been increased interest in a notion of generic essence, where "... a generic statement is one which states that to be thus and thus is essentially to be so and so", Correia (2006) and Correia and Skiles (2017).

² In the following, when I speak of the ultimacy of essence, I have this ultimate character of explanations involving the essence as explanans in mind.

explanatory road”.³ On the other hand, the ultimacy of essence involves the nature of essence itself, or *essentiality*. In this respect, the question is why essentialist explanations have this peculiar character of being ultimate.⁴

It is important to distinguish the two aspects of *finality* and of *essentiality* of essentialist explanations because they relate to two different concerns one might have regarding essentialist explanations. That these are *final* answers the question of *why* it is that there is no explanation of why x is essentially F . An answer to this question may refer to the fact that F is an essential property. By contrast, that they are *essential* answers the question *in virtue of what* this essentialist explanation holds. An answer to this question may refer to particular features of the essence. The accounts to be discussed do not distinguish between both aspects. This enables their proponents to claim that essences explain *simply because* they are essences. My discussion intends to drive a wedge between these two aspects of essentialist explanation.

It is relevant to appraise the ultimacy of essentialist explanation in light of the ongoing debate between modalists (who hold that modal notions such as metaphysical or other forms of necessity enjoy metaphysical explanatory primacy over the notion of essence, or who outright reject the latter notion) and essentialists (who hold the opposite view).⁵ Given that an explanation in terms of the ultimacy of essence entails the necessity of the explanandum, demonstrating the viability of this form of explanation would make a strong case for essentialism. My own view is that a modal account of essence via intrinsicality, on which x is F because it is intrinsically necessary for x to be F provides a better alternative for the claims that essentialist explanations are meant to make.

In the following I critically survey three recent accounts of essentialist explanation. I take these to each provide a version of an ultimate essentialist explanation. And while there are shared motives concerning the explanatory role of the nature of essence, I take these views to present us with a spectrum of approaches that the proponent of essences can take towards the ultimate nature of essentialist explanation. I make my case by discussing how each explanatory approach falls short of the purported ultimacy. The views to be discussed are the following: a view that

³ Glazier (2017, 2872). The locution “ultimacy of essence” is taken from this paper as well.

⁴ To bring this out more clearly, consider Dasgupta’s distinction between brute facts and essentialist facts. Brute facts are in principle amenable to explanation in terms of other facts, for instance if they refer to the (initial) state of a physical system which can be explained causally. Essentialist facts are not amenable to further explanation. “In virtue of what is it part of *what water is* that it is composed of H_2O ?” Dasgupta (2014, 386f.). Answer: the nature of water is what ultimately explains that water is composed of H_2O . “It is again hard to know what to say other than that is *just what water is!*” Ibid. Here, the first aspect of the ultimacy of essence mentioned above concerns the fact that there is no further explanation of the nature of water than the one stated. In contrast, the second aspect concerns the essentiality of the stated essence: we are not just confronted with an ultimate fact, but also with that fact’s ultimacy.

⁵ For an overview of the modal/non-modal views on essence cf. Torza (2024) and Koslicki (2024), respectively.

turns on the idea of the immediate relevance of essentialist explanations (1), and on the modal nature of essences (2) and an essentialist explanation that purports to be “inessential” (3). I argue that these accounts demonstrate various ways in which essentialist explanations fail to be ultimate in the intended sense and conclude by suggesting why a modal account of intrinsicality may be preferable (4 and 5).

1 The immediate relevance of essence

The first view to be considered is Spinelli (2018). Spinelli’s view is, roughly, that essentialist explanation is ultimate if what is essential to the object is also what is immediately relevant to it. The idea is that essence is ultimate in the sense that, in stating the essence of x , no further, i.e., *more relevant* appeal as to what x fundamentally is can be made.

Relevant Essence (RE): For F to be essential to x is to be immediately relevant to x .

Intuitively, we can think of relevance here as comprising those features of x that are most relevant to what it is. For instance, it is immediately relevant to Socrates to be human. It is not immediately relevant to Socrates that his being human is a property. I take Spinelli to aim at providing a notion of the essence of x which only contains x ’s immediately relevant properties. The main explanatory burden for Spinelli is to show how there can be a relevant essence of x that does not contain any F not immediately relevant to x .

In developing his account, Spinelli defends the claim that essences are entities in their own right, i.e., that they are not identical with the object they are the essence of.⁶ The purpose of this is to demonstrate that there is an entity, the object’s immediate essence, satisfying (RE). Spinelli argues for this claim against Lowe (2008), who holds that essences are non-entitative. According to Lowe, the idea that the essence of an object is an entity in its own right faces the challenge of starting an infinite regress: to say what the essence of an object is would require a further entity, the essence of the essence, which would require another essence and so forth. As a result of the regress, we would never understand a thing in terms of its essence. Importantly, as reconstructed by Spinelli, the regress is not epistemologically motivated. That an essence requires another essence is not due to the cognitive abilities of an agent, but results from the relation between entity and essence. This has the metaphysical consequence that “... to be what

⁶ Spinelli (2018, 413).

it is, x needs infinitely many essences of essences.”⁷ As a result, according to Lowe’s Regress, an entitative view of essence entails that an object cannot be what it is. To counter the regress argument, a workable concept of the essence of essence is needed.

What then is the essence of essence? Take the property of being human. Say this is (part of) the essence of Socrates. On Spinelli’s construal, we can either understand the essence of this essence *objectually*: the essence of being human consists in being an abstract object, or more simply, being a property. Alternatively, we can understand the essence of this essence *generically*: being human is being an animal. Spinelli opts for the objectual view, since the generic view requires that essences be analyzable in terms of their genera. Such an analysis may not be available for some candidates for essential properties (e.g., goodness).⁸

The notion of objectual essence is put to use by Spinelli in the following counter-argument to Lowe’s Regress:

- (1) Whatever belongs to the essence of an object has to be relevant to what that object is.
- (2) Every object has an essence_o which is itself an entity.
- (3) Every essence_o has an essence_{o(o)} which takes the former as its object, indefinitely.
- (4) Essence_{o(o)} states what essence_o is.
- (5) Essence_{o(o)} is not relevant to the object.
- (6) It is not relevant to the object what essence_o is.

(1) is a relevance principle Spinelli introduces: what is stated as the essence should have an immediate bearing on what the object in question is.⁹ (2) Is the entitative view of essences. (3) and (4) are the objectual construal of Lowe’s Regress. (5) Follows from the relevance principle and (6) is simply a restatement of (5). The critical step is obviously (5). It stops the regress by deeming the further explanantia it yields to be irrelevant to the explanandum. In Spinelli’s words: “Socrates’s being immediately essentially human is not founded on the property of being human’s being (immediately) essentially a property: because ... what the property of being human is, is not directly relevant to what Socrates is.”¹⁰ The regress only gets started if essence_o

⁷ Ibid., 418.

⁸ On Spinelli’s account, it remains obscure how the two ways to understanding being human differ to yield the objectual or generic understanding. For a different construal of the objectual/generic distinction of essence, cf. Correia (2006).

⁹ The relevance principle is adopted from Fine’s distinction between mediate and immediate essence (Fine 1995b, 61f.). In this context, we can equate the immediate essence (which has a direct bearing on what the object is) with essence_o and the mediate essence (which incorporates the essences of all the objects on which it depends) with each further essence_{o(o)}.

¹⁰ Spinelli (2018, 424).

requires, to amount to being the essence of the object, an essence_{O(O)} making it what it is, and so indefinitely.

This last point leads to an obvious objection to the argument Spinelli offers: in order to claim the intended relevance, essence_O needs to be what it is. But to be what it is, essence_O requires an essence_{O(O)} which in turn require further essence and so forth. An essence without essence cannot be relevant. This amounts to the negation of (6) above: it turns out that it is indeed relevant to the object just what *its essence* is.¹¹

In responding to this objection, we come to the heart of Spinelli's account of the ultimacy of essence: *What the essence is, is not relevant to its object*. In terms of the example, what the immediate essence of Socrates is, is not relevant to what Socrates is. What it is to be human is not relevant for the essentialist fact that Socrates is essentially human.¹² The ultimacy in this account of essentialist explanation can then be stated as follows: there is no further essential fact that explains why Socrates is essentially human, other than: to be human is essential, or immediately relevant, to Socrates.

Given this view, the above objection can be answered by insisting that what is relevant to the essence of the object is not relevant to the object itself. But, the objector may (and I think should) insist: why is it not relevant to Socrates what his humanity itself is? Isn't it the case that in order to state why essence_O is relevant, we would have to specify essence_{O(O)}? More particularly, the objection is that essence_{O(O)} is not relevant to what the object is under the assumption that the essence of the object already includes what its essence is. In order to be a viable candidate for being in Socrates' immediate essence, being human, in this sense, already includes being a property.

I think that Spinelli's reason for thinking that we do not need to take into consideration the essence of Socrates' essence is only *apparent*. It appears to be motivated by the observation that it intuitively seems less relevant, and indeed *trivial*, that being human is being a property. But this is so on the assumption that Socrates' essentially being human *already includes* what being human is. This assumption simply begs the question against the problem behind Lowe's regress of having to state what the essence is in order for essential statements as the ultimate explanation of what the object is.

¹¹ As against this objection, one may hold that the notion of relevance is hyperintensional: while it may be necessary for the object to have its essence, and for the object's essence to have its properties (i.e., that it is necessary of Socrates' humanity to have the form of being a property), there is no transitive closure between the modal existential dependence of the object on its essence and of essence on its essence. Therefore, (6) stands (I thank Michi Wallner for this objection). As I will argue in the following, I do not think that this notion of relevance can be endorsed without begging the question.

¹² Spinelli (2018, 424).

Given this way of understanding the proposal, there is a good sense in asking why Socrates is essentially human, namely the sense in which his humanity *itself* contributes to what Socrates essentially is. The explanation involving only his immediate essence then turns out to not be ultimate after all. Another way to put the point is using the distinction between the *final* and *essential* aspects of essentialist explanation: we can say why being human is immediately essential to Socrates, but this still leaves open the question in virtue of what it is essential to him.

Admittedly, the answer to the question in virtue of what it is essential to Socrates to be human may seem trivial. It is trivial because that in virtue of which the explanation holds, namely, the immediately relevant property of being human, trivially is a property. Nevertheless, the explanans admits of distinctions which render the question in virtue of what the explanation holds non-trivial. To see this, consider that it is a non-trivial question whether properties are universals, particulars such as tropes or some other kind of (non)entity. Given that it belongs to the essence of Socrates' humanity to be a property, to say that it lies in the essence of Socrates to be human means something different depending on the underlying conception of property involved. For instance, if the property of being human is a universal, then Socrates instantiates it in the same way as every other human being. If the property of being human is a trope, then it is rather something like an abstract part of Socrates. On one view, tropes are not objects, but non-objectual ways that an object is.¹³ Accordingly, the essentialist explanation of why Socrates is essentially human would be that this is essentially the way that Socrates is. This implies that the essence of Socrates' humanity in this case cannot be, contra Spinelli, an abstract object (given that tropes are not objects on the presupposed view). But if the essence of Socrates may have a different essence, then Socrates has a different essence as well. And this contradicts Spinelli's central assumption that it is not relevant to the object what its essence is.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that it is not possible for Spinelli's approach to accommodate different conceptions of objectual essence. My intention is merely to bring out that the nature of essence, *pace* Spinelli, raises non-trivial questions about how we understand the essentialist explanation. But then, it is not ultimate.

2 The modal nature of essence

The second account of the ultimacy of essence to be discussed is presented in Wallner and Vaidya (2020). Roughly put, the authors propose a Finean account on which essentialist

¹³ Cf. Mulligan, Simons, Smith (1984).

statements are ultimate in that they confer necessity by virtue of being statements of essence. To the question: what makes it the case that Socrates is necessarily human? The answer is: his essence. Socrates is necessarily human by virtue of his essence.

With their proposal, Wallner and Vaidya take on the challenge of explaining how essence entails necessity. That is, granted that a thing is what it is by virtue of its essence, how do we arrive at the further assumption that a thing *must be* what it is by virtue of its essence? What is the specific necessity-conferring property of essentialist explanation?

An explanation of how essence entails necessity faces the following question: are essences themselves non-modal, such that the entailment of necessity would have to rely on further, substantial assumptions, over and above the explanation by essence?¹⁴ Or do essences entail necessity without further substantial assumptions? The authors opt for the second alternative. In particular, their claim has the following reflexive form:

Necessary Essence (NE): It lies in the essence of essence to be necessary.

The authors concede that, on the basis of this claim alone, modalists and essentialists are at a standoff as to who has the better account of *de re* necessity.¹⁵ To bolster their claim, they draw on a suggestion of Bob Hale, to the effect that the necessity entailed by essentialist explanation is not, in turn, necessitated by anything else. To state the essence of *x* is to give a “non-transmissive” explanation of necessity.¹⁶ That is, even though what is essential is necessary, something is not essential *because* it is necessary. Rather it is necessary *because* it is essential: “While the *explanans* (essence) is indeed necessary, the necessity of the *explanans*, i.e. the necessity of the essentialist proposition does not play an explanatory role.”¹⁷ This special explanatory status of essences as non-transmissively conferring necessity is deemed by the authors to be an ideologically primitive fact, to be stated as an axiom rather than to be given an explanation.¹⁸ To appreciate the ultimacy of essence, one should accordingly appreciate how an essentialist explanations states something that could not have been otherwise (that is necessary) *because* it is a statement of essence.

¹⁴ This question might be understood along the following lines: suppose that *x* is what it is on account of its essence. This does not yet entail that *x must be* what it is on account of its essence. On this picture, how essence entails necessity is a substantial question. Cf. Romero (2019) and Mackie (2020).

¹⁵ Cf. Wallner and Vaidya (2020, 435).

¹⁶ The relevant idea of transmission here stems from Simon Blackburn’s challenge to give the ultimate source of the necessity of an explanation: either the necessity of an explanans has been transmitted from a further necessary explanans, or it is contingent, in which case it is not clear why it should be necessary.

¹⁷ Wallner and Vaidya (2020, 437).

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 440.

I do not think that this proposal vindicates the purported ultimacy of essentialist explanation. In particular, I do not think that essences have been shown to have the special property of conferring necessity. Given the present proposal, what reason does the essentialist have to think that an essence is something that can confer necessity?

One obvious reason is the ultimate character of essentialist explanations. Essence is *more ultimate* than necessity, because that something is necessarily *F* follows from its being essentially *F*. As discussed, the authors take this to be a primitive fact, or an axiom. Thus, they never spell out their idea of essence beyond a discussion of its explanatory characteristics. This leaves the notion of ultimacy emerging from the proposal somewhat incomplete. One wants to ask the following question: Granted that essence confers necessity because it is essential to essences to do so – what is the nature of essence, such that it has this capacity? This question does not aim at the problem of how we get from essence to necessity, but concerns the nature of essence.

One may respond that the very necessity-conferring capacity of essence *is* the nature of essence in the relevant sense, and that, therefore, no further explanation is required. But given that the authors insist that the explanatory force of essence is essential, i.e., *non-modal*, to refer to the necessity of the explanandum is of no help to explain the nature of the explanans. What is missing, it seems, is a substantial metaphysical assumption about the nature of essences themselves. Thus, while the authors account for the *finality* of essentialist explanations, they do not (find it necessary to) account for their *essentiality*.

One could pose a parallel question to a modalist: as what should we conceive (de re) necessity? On a general modalist view, de re necessity is explained by the following conditional: If the object exists, then it necessarily is *F*. The object appears with its stock of invariant properties in every possible world in which it can be imagined (or in which it exists). The modal intuition of necessity can be cashed out in terms of a plurality of real or abstract possible worlds. The proponent of essences, by comparison, does not have such an extensional solution at her disposal. She has to explain how the essence *makes x be necessarily F*. But it is not clear, given (NE), what it is about the essence of essence that confers necessity.

The obvious rejoinder to my complaint on the part of the authors would be to point out that the answer is meant to be non-substantive: “The point about the axiomatic solution is precisely to convey that we don’t need any substantive source or ground for the necessity of essences or essentialist claims/propositions/facts, since their necessity is ‘built into’ the very nature of what essence is.”¹⁹ It seems to me that this can be understood in three different ways: Either it is a

¹⁹ Wallner (2022, 449)

stipulative claim, such that necessity is built into the nature of essence as a matter of how we use that concept. Or it is a claim about the meaning of essence, to the effect that essence analytically entails necessity.²⁰ But this would simply beg the question against the skeptic. The third option is to understand it as a *metaphysical* claim, such that it refers to a property of essences insofar as these belong to the ontological furniture of the world. But if this is the case, then I do not see how the question of how essences entail necessity by virtue of *their* essence could *not* be a substantive question. In the following, I will show that it is a substantive question on the proposal of the authors as well. This turns on the idea that the entailment of necessity by essence does not hold upon closer examination.

In order to see this, we have to take a closer look at (NE), i.e., that it lies in the essence of essence to be necessary. In fully spelling out their proposal, the authors point out that (NE) combines a first-order and a higher-order claim. The first-order claim is that the fact that *F* is essential to *x* explains why *x* is necessarily *F*. The second-order claim explains why the first-order claim holds, namely in virtue of the essence of essence. Thus, the claim is not:

(#NE) Essences have a necessity-conferring capacity because of their modal status.

Instead, the claim is:

(NE1) Essences have a necessity-conferring capacity because it is essential to essence that they have this necessity-conferring capacity.

The difference between the two claims, according to the authors, is that (#NE) violates the requirement that essentialist explanations be irreflexive, because the explanandum reiterates the explanans. By contrast, (NE1) is genuinely irreflexive because the fact in the explanans (a fact about the essence of essence) is not identical to the fact about the explanandum (a modal truth about essence).

Given this rendition, one can state more precisely why necessity is not entailed by essentiality on the account. To see this, observe that it is not true, according to the authors, that *x*'s being *F* is necessary *because* of the nature of *x*'s essence. The nature of essence does not explain the conferral of necessity directly, but by explaining the complex fact that *F* is necessary because it is essential to *x*, in symbols: '[$\Box$] $\Box$ *xF*' explains ('[$\Box$]*xF*' explains '[$\Box$]*F*').²¹ Importantly, taking

²⁰ The authors say something to this effect in Wallner and Vaidya (2020, 437). But this seems to be merely an illustrative claim.

²¹ Wallner and Vaidya (2020, 438).

this indirect route does not actually give us an answer to the question as to why F is necessary *given that it is essential to x* . The authors admit as much: "... [(NE1)] does not entail that '[$\Box$] $\Box p$ ' plays a role in the explanation of '[$\Box$] F '. It only plays a role in the explanation of ('[$\Box$] F ' explains '[$\Box$] F ')."²² So it does not follow directly from the nature of Socrates' essence that he is necessarily human. Rather, Socrates is essentially such that it follows from his essence that he is necessarily human.

It is not obvious to me what exactly this higher-order fact about Socrates' essence amounts to. In particular, my question is: what is the sense of the claim that '[$\Box$] F ' explains '[$\Box$] F ', i.e., that Socrates is necessarily human given that it is essential to him, if we do not *thereby* have an answer as to why it is necessary that this follows from the nature of his essence. If the fact that '[$\Box$] F ' explains '[$\Box$] F ' does not *already* explain why necessity follows from essence (given that, on the account, this is only accounted for through the higher-order fact involving '[$\Box$] $\Box p$ ') it is not clear what it means that F is necessary because it is essential. More generally, it is not clear what it means for a property to be necessary given that it is essential if this *whole fact* requires yet another fact which "seals the deal" of essential entailment. Intuitively, F being essential to Socrates should be enough for Socrates to be necessarily F . But on the account, it is not. And in this sense, it fails to be ultimate.²³

3 Inessential explanation

Glazier (2017) puts forward an account on which the "... ultimacy of an essentialist explanation consists in there being no essentialist explanation of its explanans."²⁴ Relevant to the discussion at hand is the following negative claim:

(IE) Iterated essentialist claims are not ultimate.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, 437.

²³ Contra the above argument, one could hold that to require an explanation for an axiomatic proposal like the one presented by the authors is to misunderstand the proposal. In this vein, the authors refer to Schaffer (2016) according to whom an axiomatic posit is meant to underwrite a given explanation, such as an inference to a general law. Yet as Schaffer also notes, one needs a justification for introducing the axiomatic posit, for instance because this constitutes an inference to the best explanation of certain regularities (as in the case of general laws). I am not sure that any such reasons can be found in the present case. As the authors note, their axiomatic solution is meant to be a tie-breaker between modalists and essentialists. But if the primary purpose of the axiomatic approach is to break the tie, then it seems to serve no other end than to vindicate the essentialist. Thus, it may well be that we need to accept that it is the business of laws to govern in order to achieve generality and simplicity. Do we need to accept that it is in the business of essences to entail necessity? I do not see any comparable reasons that would justify this axiomatic posit.

²⁴ Glazier (2017, 2884).

(IE) is part Glazier's general argument against the idea that an essentialist explanation could be amended with an iterated essentialist claim while preserving its ultimate character. His principle of the inessentiality of essence states: "There do not exist s , t and A (where s and t are not necessarily distinct) such that s is essentially such that t is essentially such that A ."²⁵ For instance, it is not the case that Socrates's humanity is essentially such that Socrates is essentially such that he is human. What Socrates' humanity essentially is does not explain what Socrates essentially is. The principle stated distinguishes between two cases where either s and t are *not* distinct, giving us an iterated form of essentialist explanation, and a case where s and t are distinct, resulting in a reciprocal form of essentialist explanation.

Of interest here is especially the first case: it is essential to t that t is essentially such that A . Glazier offers the following example: It is essential to {Socrates} to be essentially such as to contain Socrates. He gives the following gloss:

"We may think of this proposition, and indeed of any essentialist proposition about this set, as a statement of what the set is 'at its core'. At least part of what this set is at its core, then, is a 'container' of Socrates. Does *this* fact, about what the set is at its core, itself partly constitute what the set is at its core? It does not seem so. It is *about* the core, so to speak, rather than *part* of the core. And so we should not take singleton Socrates to be essentially such that it essentially contains Socrates."²⁶

Glazier appears to think along the lines encountered in the discussion of Spinelli above: the proposition about what is essential to being essential to {Socrates} provides something like the objectual or generic explanation of the essence: {Socrates} is essentially such that it is a container of Socrates. Yet being container-like does not *essentially* explain why {Socrates} contains Socrates. Rather, the nature of {Socrates} does. In terms of the criterion of immediacy, the criticized essentialist explanation does not immediately tell us why x is F .

As before, we may raise the question as to whether there can be an ultimacy of essentialist explanation if facts about the explanans are not tacitly presupposed by it. For instance, does not the property of being container-like play a substantial part in the essentialist explanation that {Socrates} contains Socrates because it lies in the very nature of {Socrates} to do so? Intuitively, I find that I am only satisfied by this explanation as ultimate if my idea of the essence of {Socrates} includes its being container-like. There are further non-trivial facts about the

²⁵ Ibid., 2885.

²⁶ Ibid.

essentialist explanans which play a role in bringing about the ultimacy of the essentialist explanation. In the case at hand, these facts concern the modal character of the set theory according to which, "... Socrates belongs to singleton Socrates, if he exists; for, necessarily, the singleton exists if Socrates exists and, necessarily, Socrates belongs to singleton Socrates if both Socrates and the singleton exist"²⁷. This seems to imply that my being satisfied with the essentialist explanation presupposes my awareness of certain modal properties of the explanans, without which it would not at all be clear why the singleton set of an existing object should contain that object as its sole member. Equally importantly, it would not be clear why the singleton set *must* contain an existing object as its sole member.

Does this in turn mean that *it is essential to t that t is essentially such that A* provides a more ultimate form of essentialist explanation than the proposition that *t* is essentially *A*? This depends on what we take the explanatory role of the iteration to be.²⁸

Ditter (2024) defends an argument for iterated essentialist explanations to the effect that iterated essentialist statements are true insofar as they are intrinsically necessary. We have encountered a version of this argument in Wallner and Vaidya (2020) above, according to whom essences are essentially such as to confer necessity. Ditter makes this idea precise in distinguishing two forms of iterated essentialist statements. On the first form of the iterated essentialist statement, "... if it is essential to *x* that *p*, then it is essential to *x* that it is essential to *x* that *p*."²⁹ This formulation is subject to the criticism that the iteration does not add to the explanatory power of the explanans.

Ditter's second version of the iterated essentialist statements adds *essentiality* to the subject of the outer essentialist operator, giving us the following iterated essentialist principle: "... if it is essential to *x*₁ ..., *x*_{*n*} that *p*, then it is essential to *x*₁ ..., *x*_{*n*} *together with essentiality* (i.e., what is expressed by the essentialist operator) that it is essential to *x*₁ ..., *x*_{*n*} that *p*."³⁰

In view of the preceding discussion, this principle is of interest for two reasons. Firstly, it makes explicit that an essentialist explanation requires the further assumption of *essentiality* in order to confer necessity. This seems to suggest, contra Wallner and Vaidya, that the essentialist explanation alone does not entail the necessity of the explanandum. Secondly, in this form of iterated essentialist statement, essence is collective. Thus, while one may deny that it is essential

²⁷ Fine (1994, 4).

²⁸ I note that here, the discussion concerns a constitutive view of essence, such that essentialist explanations are taken to state what the object is at its core. It is not *prima facie* obvious how the iterated essential statement is to be taken to bear on what this core is (by contrast to a view of consequentialist essence, from which the being container-like could simply be seen to follow), cf. Fine (1995b, 56-58).

²⁹ Ditter (2024, 6).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5).

to Socrates *alone* to be essentially human, it is essential to Socrates to be essentially human *together with* the addition of essentiality.³¹

In thus factoring out essentiality, the iterated essentialist statement does not have the consequence that essentiality is involved in the nature of x .³² On Ditter's proposal then, there are iterated essentialist statements of the form: *s is essentially such that t is essentially such that A*. In particular, "... s is the essentialist operation E – the operation that takes t and A to t is essentially such that A ."³³

Ditter thus establishes the necessity of essence by a technical maneuver: the iteration modifies the essentialist operator to reflect the difference between what follows from a given nature and what follows from the essentiality expressed by the operator. But this modification of the operator alone does not confer necessity to the explanandum. What is further required is the assumption that essentialist truths are necessary. On that assumption, essentiality entails necessity. What is claimed to be attractive about this view is "... the idea that the necessity of an essentialist truth flows at least in part from the nature of essentiality itself."³⁴

Does this form of iteration constitute a "more ultimate" essentialist explanation than that of the other proposals discussed, and does it provide a plausible account of the necessity of essence? In response, I do not see what the iteration, in modifying the essentialist operator, adds to the essentialist explanation. The modification induces a distinction between what follows from a given nature and what follows from the essentiality expressed by the operator: it follows from Socrates' nature *and* essentiality together that he is essentially human. But the fact that essentiality is not involved in Socrates' nature means that necessity is entailed by the iterated operator, not by Socrates' nature. On the account, then, it is not because of what Socrates is that he is necessarily what he is. But this is what the ultimate essentialist explanation is meant to explain.³⁵ It is not obvious what the entailment of necessity adds to the explanation if it results from the treatment of the essentialist operator.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 8).

³² Cf. Ditter (2022, 665).

³³ Glazier (2017, 2887). Wording changed.

³⁴ Ditter (2024, 5).

³⁵ A further technical reason for Ditter's view seems to be that the essentialist operator should not be taken to be involved in the essence of Socrates, for instance because what is expressed by the essentiality operator does not belong to Socrates' essence, cf. Ditter (2022, 665). However, this line of reasoning is still subject to the concerns voiced above, namely that it has not been shown why Socrates' essence in particular should be necessary.

4 Necessity and intrinsicity

The foregoing survey has discussed different ways of how the ultimacy of essentialist explanation fails to be ultimate. The main reason for this has turned out to be the fact that the essentialist explanans admits of further distinctions which have a non-trivial bearing on our understanding of the explanandum. I do not think that this is surprising at all. If we take seriously the idea that an essentialist account of x is meant to account for what x is in a substantial, metaphysical sense, then we should not expect essences to be so simple and insubstantial as to admit of the kinds of ultimate explanations criticized the foregoing discussion.

In the following, I suggest an alternative, modalist view of essence, according to which x is essentially F iff x is *intrinsically* necessarily F .³⁶

(INE) Intrinsic necessary essence: x is essentially F iff being F is intrinsically necessary to x .

The motivation behind this suggestion is that it allows us to explain x 's essentially being F without committing to essence as a further explanatory entity. Instead, we can then think of x itself as the locus of the necessity of its essential features. We do not appeal to an essence of x in order to explain why it is necessarily F , but to the parts that x is made of.

Any modal approach to essentialist questions has to face up to the seminal critique of modality in Fine (1994), which rejects the notion that an object's necessary properties are thereby essential to it. Whereas all necessary properties are intensionally equivalent in that they equally obtain insofar as they are necessary, picking out the properties that are essential to a given object requires making finer distinctions than intensional ones, whence the hyperintensional notion of essence. Thus, while it may be necessary that Socrates is such that $\{\text{Socrates}\}$ contains Socrates, that Socrates is such that there are infinitely many prime numbers, and that Socrates is such that he is distinct from the Eiffel Tower, none of these necessary properties are essential to Socrates. A modal approach that aims to preserve these plausible results will have to find an equivalent way to distinguish what is essential from what is inessential to an object. In this context, the idea of (INE) is to limit necessity to what is intrinsic to the object, such that its necessary and essential properties coincide.

³⁶ In order to avoid the statement that contingent things are necessary, one might add the condition that x has to exist to have properties necessarily.

In the following, I will build on two recent attempts at spelling out the notion of intrinsic essence. Denby (2014) gives the following gloss of the notion of intrinsic property:

(IP) Intrinsic property: “A property is intrinsic iff its instantiation is insensitive to the state or nature of anything other than its instances; otherwise, it is extrinsic.”³⁷

As Bovey (2021) points out, (IP) has problematic consequences, such as this one:

(#IP) The property of containing Socrates is not intrinsic to {Socrates} because its instantiation is sensitive to the state of Socrates.

This result contradicts Fine’s observation that it is essential to {Socrates} to contain Socrates. The intrinsic properties of x are, contra Denby, not simply those properties whose instantiation are unrelated to everything outside of x . Conversely, it might be intrinsically necessary to x to stand in certain relations with other objects in terms of its intrinsic properties. In this sense, it is intrinsically necessary to {Socrates} to contain Socrates.

As Bovey notes, in order for the modalist to replicate the essentialist distinctions, it is not enough to account for the fact that it is essential to {Socrates} to contain Socrates, but also to account for the converse fact that it is *not* essential to Socrates to be contained by {Socrates}. In order to account for this, Bovey suggests the following amended characterization of intrinsic property:

(IP2): “ x is F , and for all y , if x is F in virtue of $\phi(y)$ – where $\phi(y)$ is a fact containing y as a constituent – then y is a part of x .”³⁸

A rough gloss of (IP2) is that constituents of facts about x ’s properties are parts of x . Importantly, parthood is here not understood along the usual mereological lines on which a whole is a fusion of its parts, but in an extended sense in which, for instance, the members of a set are considered its parts and in which properties and objects are constituent parts of facts.³⁹ Applied to the case of Socrates and his singleton, this plays out as follows: in the fact that *{Socrates} exists and its existence is necessitated by Socrates’s existence*, Socrates is a part

³⁷ Denby (2014, 91).

³⁸ This characterization is taken from Rosen (2010). In line with Rosen’s usage of the term, in the following I understand facts as worldly, i.e., as the state of reality, rather than as a representation thereof.

³⁹ Cf. Bovey (2021, 7725). The idea goes back to the part-whole pluralism discussed in Fine (2010). I return to this idea in what follows.

{Socrates}. Thus, {Socrates} has the property of containing Socrates *in virtue of* this fact. Conversely, in the fact that *Socrates exists and necessitates {Socrates}'s existence*, {Socrates} is not part of Socrates. Thus, Socrates does not have the property of being contained by {Socrates} in virtue of this fact.

On this proposal, intrinsicity is understood in terms of a part-whole relationship: containing Socrates is an intrinsic property of {Socrates} because Socrates is a part of his singleton. If {Socrates}, i.e., the whole, loses this part (for instance because Socrates goes out of existence), it ceases to exist as well. The idea of (INE) is then that what is essential to x are its intrinsic properties, which are constituted by the parts of x . These parts are necessary insofar as they follow from x 's existence (x has them whenever it is the case that it exists).

This is the basis on which this modalist approach is able to offer an alternative to the essentialist approach: it is not the case that some property is necessary because it is essential. Instead, what is essential follows from what the existing object is in terms of its parts, in particular, those parts which are involved in facts stating what is intrinsic, or necessary to x . These parts are constituents of x , rather than features of a further entity, such as its essence. There is no mystery as to why constituent facts are essential to x : x has them, insofar as it exists, and insofar as they co-constitute the whole that is x .

On this picture the idea of an ultimate explanation takes on a different sense from the essentialist approach discussed above: when we ask what makes it the case that x is essentially F , we are asking for those of its parts which it necessarily and intrinsically has. An answer to such a question need not be ultimate, given that the parts themselves might have further parts. That is, the explanans – the fact involving the part in virtue of which x is F – does not purport to be ultimate, since there may be a further fact such that that fact states in virtue of what the first fact states in virtue of what x is F . Instead of iterated essentialist claims, we have an analysis in terms of (transitive) parthood. Whereas iterated claims about the essence of essence or reflexive claims about the essentiality of essence have turned out to be problematic in the course of the foregoing discussion, the parthood relation appears to offer a tractable explanans. But in order to substantiate this claim more needs to be said about the kinds of parts we are dealing with on this proposal.

The need to give a more precise notion of the parthood of intrinsic properties is already obvious from the fact that Socrates cannot be part of {Socrates} in the mereological sense of parthood, where wholes are understood as mereological sums or fusions of their parts. Surely, we do not, without further qualification, want to count the parts of Socrates, such as his hair and fingernails, as parts of his singleton. The suggestion of Fine (2010) is to adopt a pluralistic

approach with a general set of principles governing the parthood relation. In particular, principles of composition of wholes out of parts will not only include summation or fusion operations, but also set-builder operations. In the latter case, the component parts “... will fail to be transitive since components of components (i.e., members of members) will sometimes fail to be components (members).”⁴⁰

This is not to say that we cannot, on such a pluralist approach, have entities with several distinct parthood relations. On Fine’s account the relation between {Socrates} and his singleton is a hybrid relation, involving set-theoretic and mereological parts. There is a difference between the way in which Socrates’ fingernail is part of Socrates and the way in which Socrates is part of {Socrates}. Yet the oddity of the fact that Socrates’ fingernail is part of his singleton is mitigated by the fact that the part of Socrates and his singleton are related via several distinct compositional principles.

The question now is whether this suggestion can help us to better understand (IP2), according to which the constituents of facts about x ’s properties are parts of x . One way this will be the case is if we understand the part as being *prior* to the whole it is involved in composing. That is, x is F in virtue of a fact containing some prior part composing x . The application to our example is straightforward: {Socrates} contains Socrates in virtue of the fact that Socrates, whose existence necessarily entails his singleton, is prior to {Socrates}. More generally, this suggestion implies that x is generated from its prior parts, such that {Socrates} is generated from applying the set-builder operation to Socrates.⁴¹

While this generative approach works in the case of Socrates and his singleton, I am not sure that it can work in general. The fundamental reason for this, I suggest, is that the parts involved in the facts in virtue of which things have their intrinsic necessary properties, are not in general prior, in either a temporal or metaphysical sense, to their objects. Instead, they are the parts of the object. Thus, it is not in general the case that x is F in virtue of facts involving parts prior to x , i.e., in virtue of generative facts involving parts of x . But then, in virtue what do facts involving x ’s parts account for its intrinsic properties? This is the question which, on this account, replaces the question of why x is essentially F .

With a view to the previous discussion, it would be a desideratum that the *in-virtue-of*-relation should not (necessarily) be understood as ultimate. If x is F in virtue of a fact containing y , then it should (at least in principle) be possible that y is G in virtue of a fact containing z (where z is a part of y). In other words, the *in virtue of* relation should allow for transitivity. Combined with

⁴⁰ Fine (2010, §3).

⁴¹ Cf. Fine (2010, §9)

the pluralistic notion of parthood, we thus have a very liberal view of the composition of intrinsic properties: there is a compositional chain from Socrates' singleton to each of his body parts. This, I think, is as it should be. If we want to single out what is essential to Socrates, in the sense of what is intrinsically necessary to him, we should look at Socrates' parts. Rather than referring to his constitutive essence, we refer to the parts constituting him.

If this construal of the in-virtue-of relation is to be cogent, it has to obey further constraints on parthood, such as asymmetry: if y is part of x , then x cannot be a part of y (unless $x=y$). Whether parts are irreflexive will depend on the kind of part under consideration, given the background pluralism. Whereas mereological parts are standardly taken to be parts of themselves, other, e.g., set-theoretic parts may have to be treated as irreflexive (a member of a set is not thereby a member of itself). Additionally, it is plausible that facts containing parts should be non-monotonic. The fact that *{Socrates} exists and its existence is necessitated by Socrates's existence or grass is green* contains parts that are not part of Socrates, violating the requirement that the fact's parts should involve constituents in virtue of which x is F .

So far, the requirements look quite similar to the ones that are usually associated with grounding explanations.⁴² A considerable difference is that the intrinsic in-virtue-of relation is not required to be well-founded: whereas grounding explanations are usually taken to bottom out in elements that are themselves ungrounded, this is not the case on the current picture. Intrinsic parts are not explanatory by virtue of being ultimate or ungrounded, but in virtue of being related to the parts that constitute them and the parts they are involved in constituting. Likewise, the notions of full and partial ground are relativized to the parthood-relations which the "grounding" terms involve: in one sense of parthood, the existence of Socrates is the full ground of the existence of his singleton. But the account equally allows thinking of the parts of Socrates as partial grounds of {Socrates}, given that these parts are constituents in the facts about Socrates' material composition.

Let me immediately make two remarks about the proposal. Firstly, the idea is not to abandon the notion of facts being ungrounded altogether. Rather, relations of groundedness are relativized to relations between facts involving intrinsic parts. The kinds of claims associated with intrinsic necessity could then be understood as a particular kind of grounding claim: those restricted to the claims in which the explanans involves constituent parts of the explanandum.⁴³ Secondly, the proposal does not imply that there are non-terminating downward grounding chains, such that "... the being of any object in such a chain would be 'infinitely deferred, never

⁴² Cf. Raven (2015).

⁴³ In order to see the difference to standard notions of grounding, consider that, on these notions, properties are not composed by the items that figure in grounding claims about them, cf. Rosen (2010, 125).

achieved””.⁴⁴ This is already ruled out by the asymmetry-constraint. The idea behind this liberal approach to parthood-facts is that, if x is F in virtue of facts involving y (or a plurality of parts $y_1 \dots y_n$), and if y is G in virtue of facts involving z (or a plurality of parts $z_1 \dots z_n$), it can make good sense to say that x 's being F is explained by the y -fact(s) *without* this requiring, in order to constitute an explanation of x 's being F , a further consideration of the z -fact(s) explaining that y is G . {Socrates} has the property of containing Socrates *in virtue of* the fact that {Socrates} exists and its existence is necessitated by Socrates's existence. Now, we could move further down this chain of internal parts and get further explanations as to why {Socrates} exists. Intuitively the most perspicuous version of the explanation for {Socrates} containing Socrates would invoke the whole of Socrates, not any of his parts. That would be a reason to call it relevant relative to our explanatory interests. There would be, however, no reason to call it ultimate.

Concluding Discussion

Having provided a rough outline of the suggestion, I want to consider some problems one might find with it. The most obvious might be the account's complete disregard for relevance. Whereas essentialist explanations aim at what is immediately relevant to the object, singling out some properties (being human) while discounting others (being a property), my suggestion *prima facie* has no such criterion. To reiterate, I think this is as it should be. I am not convinced that efforts to single out essences and ungrounded facts have the advertised explanatory power of being ultimate. Such explanatory claims are absent when we consider x not in terms of what is essential to it, but in terms of what is intrinsic to it. Its intrinsic properties are, along the lines of the present proposal, relativized to the informative relations we find between the facts involving its parts. That x is *intrinsically* F is then not a matter of its essence, but a matter of the parts making it up.

Yet despite this more liberal approach to what is constitutive of x , the account does not include as being intrinsic those of x 's features that are, in the literature on essence, thought to make up its *consequential* essence. Among features of the consequential essence one can find for instance those that are logically entailed by its constitutive essence. According to this notion of consequential essence, it is essential to Socrates to be human or to be such that grass is either

⁴⁴ Bliss, Trogon (2024). The idea goes back to Schaffer (2010).

green or not-green.⁴⁵ Since the parts of the second disjunct are not among those making up Socrates, they are not among his intrinsic properties.

The fact that an approach based on intrinsicity can exclude such “accidental” facts from its account of *x* might also mitigate a related worry, which is this: how does drawing a line around *x* and thereby marking a distinction between what is intrinsic and extrinsic, ensure that we end up with facts that are *only* about *x*? A way to make this worry more precise is by noting that some intrinsic properties appear to be relational. For instance, an intrinsic property may consist in a certain relation being satisfied, such as the property of *having longer legs than arms*.⁴⁶ A theory of intrinsic parthood cannot account for the instantiation of intrinsic properties of *x* when facts about the property in question involve extrinsic parts.

While I have no knockdown argument that deals with this issue, here are two ways in which one could proceed. Firstly, we could include, in facts accounting for *x*’s intrinsic property, the parts of extrinsic objects on which the instantiation of the property depends. The obvious problem with this solution is that the account would then construe the intrinsic property in terms of a mereological sum of the parts of *x* and of the parts of the external object to which it is related. Thus, the relevant notion of intrinsicity would not be preserved.

Another option would be to take a deflationary stance towards the properties in question. For instance, one may hold that such properties supervene on the relation between *x* and some external object *y*. Taking this line would involve a substantial decision on what intrinsicity amounts to. Intrinsic properties whose instantiation is sensitive to external objects would, on this suggestion, be reduced to their supervenience base, such that the property of *having longer legs than arms* would be reduced to the two properties of *having arms of length m* and *having legs of length n*. One might hold that this is not a bad result, given the following line of thought: if a property is only instantiated in virtue of the object’s relation to external objects, then it is not a full-blown intrinsic property. Considered for itself, the arm does not have the property of being shorter than the leg, and *vice versa*. Therefore, it shouldn’t be considered an intrinsic property in the first place. This strikes me as a viable procedure from an intrinsicist perspective. A special case in this regard is the property of *being a lonely* object, which does not intrinsically depend on *x*, but which also does not depend on the parts of any (non-existent) external objects either. Rosen (2010) suggests that *x* does *not* have the intrinsic property of *being a lonely object* in virtue of its parts. I concur with this suggestion. The property of being lonely seems to be a relational property that *only* holds vacuously.

⁴⁵ Cf. Fine (1995b).

⁴⁶ Cf. Marshall and Weatherson (2023).

Finally, one might wonder how the account spells out the necessity of intrinsic properties. Here is a very rough approach to this question. Given the necessity of identity, the object necessarily has all of the properties of the object it is identical with (i.e., itself). Given the further assumption that what these properties are is explained by facts involving the object's parts, we have it that the object necessarily has its properties on accounts of the parts making it up. This is a slight modification of the familiar modal view that an object has essentially those properties that are necessitated by its existence. The modification is that these properties are had necessarily insofar as they are "made of" the object's intrinsic parts.

Funding declaration: no funding to declare.

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